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A multimodal view of aspectuality in oral narratives

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Summary

The thesis considers the ways in which people construe events in oral communication, using verbal and co-verbal means. The analysis focuses on one of the basic characteristics of event representation – event boundedness – which is regarded as a multimodal phenomenon that can be characterized not only in language but also in gestures. It can be expressed verbally in the aspectual distinction between perfective forms, that refer to actions as bounded wholes, and imperfective forms, that do not specify an event as being bounded or not. In order to capture boundedness in gestures, a set of gesture schemes was derived for this project, involving gestures that include one or several energy impulses (bounded) and gestures that are produced smoothly (unbounded).

It was hypothesized that the expression of event boundedness on the verbal level can correlate with boundedness expressed on the kinesic level, acknowledging that the character of this correlation can be determined by the peculiarities of the aspectual system, which can differ according to the language. The hypothesis was tested on oral narratives produced by native speakers of Russian and of French (L1 speakers) and further on Russian speakers of French as a second language (L2 speakers). The results revealed that Russian L1 participants tended to use more bounded gestures with both aspectual forms; French L1 speakers used more bounded gestures with perfective forms (the *passé composé* tense) and more unbounded with imperfective ones (the *imparfait* tense); French L2 participants used the same proportion of bounded and unbounded gestures with perfective verbs and insignificantly more unbounded gestures with imperfective verbs. The qualitative analysis revealed three groups of factors which influenced event construal. Some factors are related to gesture production peculiarities, others – to the cognitive mechanism of profiling, and the third group – to the specifics of linguistic units and their functioning in oral narratives. The L2 data was influenced by extra factors, such as the use of word-search gestures and repetitions.

Overall, the study presents one of the first attempts to analyze aspect in Russian from a multimodal viewpoint. It gives insight into not only the category of aspect, but also the ways in which it is realized in spontaneous oral narratives, and more generally: event construal on the verbal and gestural levels.